

War Movies: The New Trend in Themes

By Brian Godawa

America is a nationalistic, imperialistic country with a military industrial complex. Military leaders and war heroes are war-mongering, insane, sadistic bastards. And the average recruit is a poor innocent schmuck, fighting an unjust war he knows nothing about, as a pawn for the political posturing of sleazy politicians and of course, greedy transnational corporations. At least that's what many war movies have tried to convince us of for the past twenty-plus years. But the times, they are a changin'. And the answer my friend, is showin' on the screen.

War is Glory

The 1940s and 50s gave us an era of over-the-top patriotic war movies best typified in the American icon of John Wayne. *The Fighting Seabees*, *Back to Bataan*, *The Sands of Iwo Jima*, and even the later Viet Nam picture, *The Green Berets*, and others at times looked as much like Frank Capra *Why We Fight* WWII propaganda as they did feature films. They tended to depict the enemy in cardboard jingoist terms, as "slanty-eyed" screaming yellow banshees, or evil incarnate soulless Nazis; and our Allied men-in-arms as larger-than-life heroes. Of course, there's nothing wrong with larger-than-life heroes. We need them. But the overwhelming emphasis was definitely on "the cause" being bigger than the self, and the power of collective duty at the expense of the individual. The spirit was clearly one of America's moral superiority to the enemy, with little recognition of our own atrocities performed in the name of making the world safe for democracy.

War is Insanity

Question: What's as bad as flag-waving, nationalistic, America-right-or-wrong bigotry? Answer: flag-burning, postmodern, America-is-always-wrong bigotry. True to form, the rebellious anti-establishment individualism of the 1960s, brought with it the questioning of authority and the American way of life in war films. In 1964, Stanley Kubrik's *Dr. Strangelove* would become the classic poster child of anti-war films for decades to come. Here we are introduced to the notion that war is not merely hell, it's insanity. And military leaders are madmen endangering the whole world with their philosophy and love of war. Kubrik would follow this insanity plea twenty-three years later with his extravaganza of Vietnam War madness, *Full Metal Jacket*. But, oh, what a spawn of anti-Vietnam war movies would fill in the gulf between those years. From *The Deer*

Hunter to Platoon and back, just about every war movie made in this time period was about Vietnam and sang the same Hollywood party line of crazy bastard military leaders, poor innocent manipulated enlistees, and America's unjust involvement. With the exception of a few movies, like *Hanoi Hilton*, *Heartbreak Ridge* and others, the American military was not readily portrayed as a bastion of discipline good for the soul and for the freedom we enjoy.

The granddaddy of all War-is-insane movies is of course, Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, which is even more emphatic in its 2001 Director's Cut *Redux*. With the added scenes of the French plantation and Playboy Bunny excursion, the crazy incongruities of civilization and war, man's bizarre commingled dignity and bestiality get a more thorough handling. And to top off the irony of it all, the writer, John Milius, intended the script to be a joyful positive paean to the glories of such extremities. In the hands of Coppola, it became one of the most enduring indictments of the war-mongering mind. Vietnam war movies ever since have often been about the politics of war, and the corruption of American political interests.

In an ironic twist of absurdity, Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* tried to bring the same anti-war sentiments to the World War II American capture of Guadalcanal. With his brooding existential narration, his crazy military colonel and his ironic depiction of the Japanese army as more wimpering victim than imperialistic aggressor, Malick made another Vietnam anti-war genre film disguised as a World War II story. One of the characters concludes, "Everything's a lie. Everything you hear. Everything you see... War don't enoble men. Turns 'em into dogs. Poisons the soul." This failure to recognize the moral justice in a self-defensive war against hostile nations bent on taking over the world and killing Americans in the process, spoils the possibility of a balanced rendering of the good and bad side of war. And that is pretty much the status quo stereotype of war films for the past two decades.

Until *Saving Private Ryan*. With this film, Steven Spielberg almost single-handedly brought back the patriotic spirit for just wars. For the first time in a long time, America was portrayed as morally justified in stamping out an "axis of evil." But it did not do so without wrestling with the ethical dilemmas involved, including the very real effects that even a righteous war has on the individual. The mission is a man, freedom is a higher cause worth dying for, and yes, even America can be right sometimes.

The New Trend

After *Ryan*, a new thematic trend in war movies began to arise. Rather than focusing on political agenda and making moral judgments about national right and wrong, some new war films have been concentrating on the existential experience of the individual with a corresponding downplaying of the politics of corporate responsibility. There is an attempt to empathize with the common soldier and the brutal reality he faces regardless of the corruption of national interest. This accounts for the almost complete focus on battle itself and avoidance of politics in such movies as *We Were Soldiers* and *Blackhawk Down*.

Interestingly, these two movies are about two very political conflicts, and while the “politics” of military strategy are accounted for, Washington’s involvement and its dirty motives are intentionally diluted. The blight that the conflict in Mogadishu was on the Clinton presidency was relegated to one relatively innocuous sentence at the end of *Blackhawk Down*: “Two weeks, later, President Clinton withdrew Delta Force.” As if Bubba’s only fault of involvement was pulling the soldiers out a bit late.

We Were Soldiers is a movie about Vietnam, normally, *nothing but* a political subject. Yet, here, the politics of American involvement are virtually ignored. Writer/director, Randall Wallace comments on a deleted political scene on the DVD :

The movie is not about politics. I wanted this movie to say soldiers are human beings. No matter what we thought about the politics of the Vietnam War. Those arguments are over politics, and ultimately obscured for us a more immediate reality. Which was the men who died on both sides of this conflict were human beings.

In the conclusion of the film, the Narrator muses, “They went to war because their country ordered them to. But in the end, they fought not for their country or their flag. They fought for each other.”

This new focus that war films have on the individual with a corresponding negation of “higher causes” or national commitment is reflected in the following recent war films and epics:

In *Blackhawk Down*, the main character thoughtfully concludes,

A friend of mine asked me, “why you going to fight somebody else’s war? What do you all think you’re heroes?”... There’s no way in hell. Nobody has to be a hero. Just sometimes turns out that way...They don’t understand. It’s about the man next to you. That’s it. That’s all it is.

In the period epic of British colonialism, *The Four Feathers*, the main character also concludes,

In the heat of battle it ceases to be an idea or a flag for which we fight. Rather we fight for the man on our right or left. When the years fall away all that remains are the memories of those precious moments we spent side by side.

Lastly, in *K-19: The Widowmaker*, the story of the ill-fated Russian nuclear submarine, the Captain stands before the gravestones of those who died in the incident and tells his other men:

These men sacrificed not for a medal, but because then the time came, it was their duty, not to the navy or to the state, but to us, their comrades.

The One and the Many

After decades of war movies reducing the fighting soldier to a pawn of spoiled innocence by higher powers with lower motives, we now have the elevation of the soldier as warrior with a respect for his courage, honor and perseverance in the midst of battle, regardless of the moral status of his superiors. As Hal Moore says on the *We Were Soldiers* DVD, “Hollywood has gotten it wrong every damn time. The message is clear: Hate war, love the American warrior. They finally got it right.” We may not agree with America meddling in Mogadishu, but we certainly respect the soldiers who had to follow their orders and fight their way out of that hell-hole. We may not agree with British colonialism, but we damn sure respect those men who stood their ground against impossible odds. We may not like Communist Russia, but we realize the Russian submariners were honest soldiers doing their jobs just like our guys, and we sympathize with their struggle to maintain fidelity to their warrior code.

Some of this change is welcome. It’s about time we recognize and appreciate the integrity of the soldier and his experience regardless of the faults of the upper brass. But the pendulum has swung to a new extreme that is not entirely honorable. That swing is from

collective responsibility to individual ultimacy. From the “one” to the “many.” By rejecting “the flag” or “the country,” that is, a cause higher than the self, as a valid motive for war, these films are wittingly or unwittingly reinforcing a destructive social doctrine of Romantic individualism. This is the belief that transcendent causes are not worth living or dying for, because there is no higher meaning to existence than the individual’s own choices. Causes are simply arbitrary social constructs of oppression. The only thing that matters is human beings as individuals, not some collective higher cause.

But there’s a big problem with this Romantic sentiment. Higher causes are precisely the transcendent standard that gives meaning and value to the individual. Apart from its arbitrariness (who says individual human beings have any value in a valueless universe?), if there are no higher causes worth fighting and dying for; if freedom, courage, honor, nation and family are not meaningful concepts that demand our obligation, then we end in a postmodern relativist dilemma of total and absolute alienation. If there is no transcendent universal to give meaning to the particulars of our existence, then everyone is doomed to an anarchic existence of unconnectedness to others. And without a transcendent unity, culture inevitably ends in tyranny, the will to power. Since there is no ultimate authority outside of the individual in this atomistic worldview, then the state, or the collective “one” ends up imposing its power arbitrarily upon individuals (the many). The tragic irony of unrestrained individualism is that it leads to the very totalitarian oppression it seeks to avoid.

And this is really what war movies have often been about: the philosophical problem of the one and the many, unity and diversity, universals versus particulars, the individual versus the collective. Should a man subordinate his individual conscience to “the one higher cause?” What if that cause is unjust? Should he obey without question? Is ours not to reason why? The one and the many is a metaphysical issue that forces us to examine whether our worldviews can account for a balance of both the unity and the plurality of experience. A worldview that maintains only unity or oneness, as Eastern worldviews do, interpret all individuality, all distinctions between things, as illusion. Reality is ultimately One, and therefore, the individual dissolves into the whole like a drop of water into the ocean. The practical results of this negation of the many (individuals), is tyranny and the negation of individual rights. It is no surprise that Eastern countries have a history of oppressive collectivism.

But the Western atomistic worldview that exalts the individual and spurns the unifying purpose is equally philosophically impoverished. For without a transcendent unity, no particulars can

possibly have meaning, no individuals are obligated to a higher authority. This descent into anarchy is either put to rest by a dictator or totalitarian regime or degenerates into a warring tribalism where the loudest, most tenacious special interest groups impose their will on the rest, another form of tyranny. Ironically, the Eastern monist worldview of ultimate oneness *and* the western atomistic worldview of ultimate manyness both ultimately lead to tyranny and the will to power because of their inability to balance and account for both realities.

To End All Wars

This dialectical tension of the one and the many is what I tried to wrestle through in my screenplay for *To End All Wars*. In this story of Allied soldiers held captive by the Imperial Japanese in World War II Thailand, is an “East meets West” dialogue. The Eastern mindset of the Imperial Japanese was the monistic Oneness of unity as an ultimate. As the Japanese interpreter in the films indicates, the Imperial Rescript states that, “one life weighs less than a feather.” The Bushido warrior code stressed duty and loyalty to one’s station in life in the hierarchy of power. To step out of line of that unity would solicit the brutal beatings that the Allied soldiers often experienced in their captivity. In an attempt to avoid stereotyping and demonizing of the enemy, I tried to give the Bushido rationale throughout the script for the things that seemed outrageous to the western mind. Of course, this didn’t justify the evil, like some kind of wishy-washy multicultural relativism, but it helped to bring the differences between East and West more into focus. By providing explanations for why the Imperial Japanese did what they did, balance was given to the clash of cultures, without negating the atrocities done under the “rising sun.”

Of course, the western mindset wasn’t the truest worldview either. The Allies arrive at the camp with an individualistic mindset. It is the overemphasis on the individual and his rights at the expense of the collective that is the fault of western thought. And it is this value that breeds the “every man for himself” and “looking out for number one” philosophies, as well as the evolutionary “survival of the fittest.” The reality of both East and West extremes leading to ruin is found in the final confrontation scene between the main antagonists Campbell (played by Robert Carlyle) and Ito (played by Sakae Kimura). After three years of torture and beatings beyond number, Campbell has a chance for revenge against the strict camp head guard, Ito. Campbell’s ultimate revelation comes when he breaks down in realization that he is no different than his enemy. His twisted warrior code and his enemy’s are the same. These two men, bitter enemies, are actually equal in their essence. And that essence is evil.

This is where the ultimate redemption in the story lies. Both East and West are extremes on opposite sides of the spectrum, and those extremes are both erroneous. The Eastern worldview negates and destroys the individual in the name of “oneness,” resulting in the oppression of the individual, and the Western worldview degenerates into anarchy and disorder in the name of “the many” or individual rights. Neither undifferentiated oneness nor unconnected plurality can be ultimate. One may think the answer is to hold to an ultimate “balance” of both unity and diversity. The problem with this is that oneness and manyness as equal ultimates cancel each other out without being rooted in a unifying principle. Simple duality as an ultimate explains antithesis, that is, one versus two, true versus false, but cannot account for the true plurality that reality exhibits. One person is not a second person, but two is not a crowd. And only a third personality accounts for both duality and community or true diversity. So reality must have an ultimate tri-unity within diversity in order to explain and account for both the oneness and manyness we see in our universe without canceling itself out in contradiction.

Just how I tried to solve this dialectical tension in *To End All Wars*, you’ll have to see the movie to find out. But suffice it to say, the new trend in war movies to emphasize the individual to the exclusion of the collective is just as imbalanced and dangerous as emphasizing the collective to the exclusion of the individual. War movies that *balance* the interests of the one with the many, that root the value of the individual in a higher cause worth dying for are not mere patriotic propaganda, they are ontologically, epistemically and morally true.

Brian Godawa is a screenwriter with a background in advertising and marketing. Over the past few years, Some of his scripts have won multiple awards in such screenplay competitions as The Nicholl Fellowship, Austin Heart of Film, Fade-In, Worldfest, Writer’s Network, and Chesterfield Writer’s Film Project. He wrote the screenplay for the movie, To End All Wars (www.toendallwarsmovie.com), starring Robert Carlyle (The Full Monty) and Kiefer Sutherland (24). Most recently, Mr. Godawa was hired by ABC/Touchstone to rewrite the mini-series, Ghost Soldiers, based on the best-selling book by Hampton Sides, and is currently adapting two novels to the screen by bestselling author Frank Peretti.